

THE GUNS

BY

GILBERT FRANKAU

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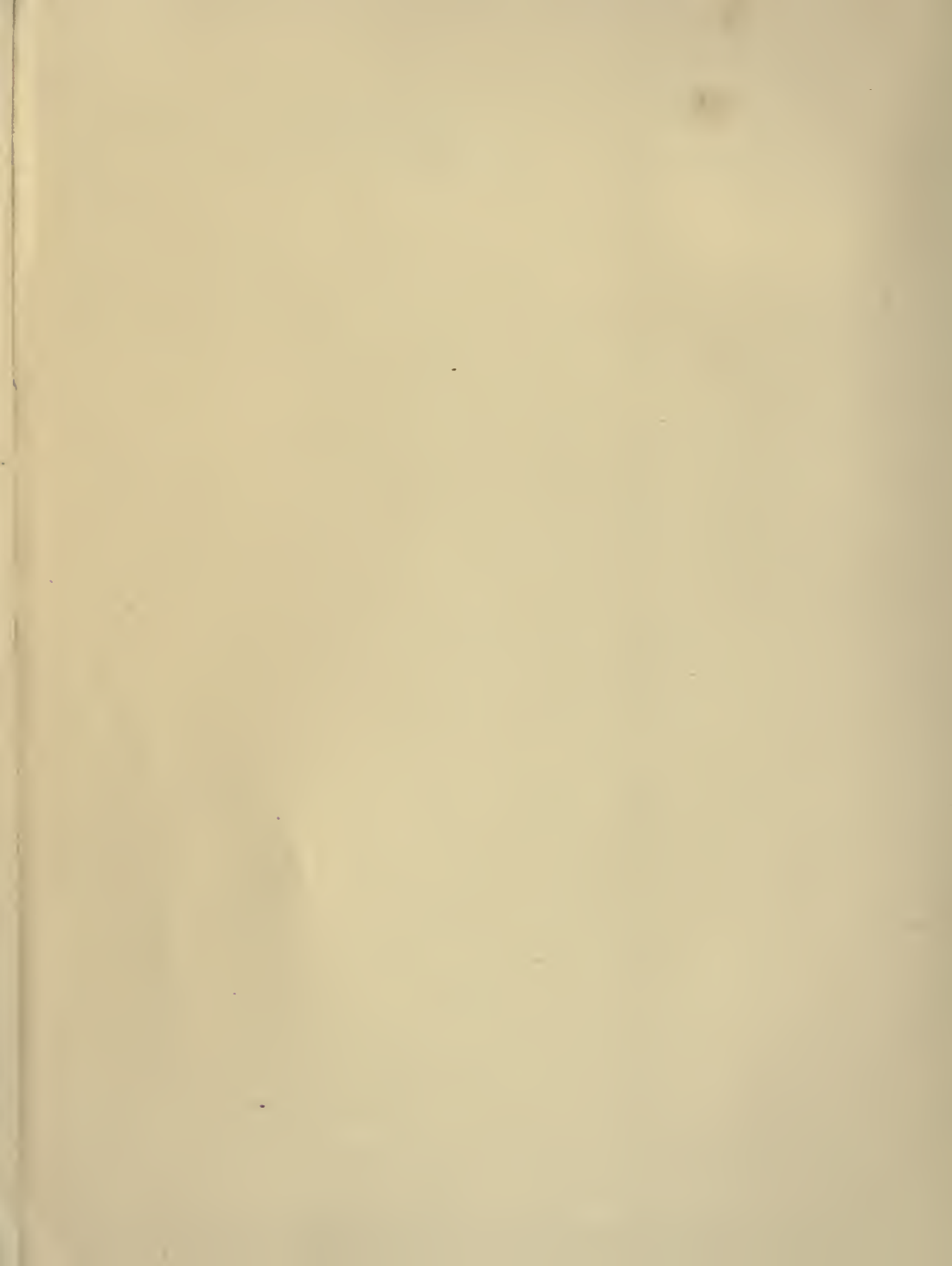


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LONDON: CHATTO & WINDUS

THE GUNS

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THE GUNS

BY

GILBERT FRANKAU

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS

1916

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*To Lieutenant-Colonel D. R. Coales, R.F.A.
—in gratitude for many kindnesses—his
Adjutant dedicates these pictures of active
service.*

*Flanders,
January, 1916.*

THE GUNS

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The Voice of the Slaves.

THE VOICE OF THE SLAVES

*We are the slaves of the guns,
Serfs to the dominant things ;
Ours are the eyes and the ears,
And the brains of their messagings.*

O URS are the hands that unleash
The blind gods that raven by night,
The lords of the terror at dawn,
When the landmarks are blotted from sight
By the lit curdled churnings of smoke ;
When the lost trenches crumblé and spout
Into loud roaring fountains of flame ;
Till, their prison walls down, with a shout
And a cheer, ordered line after line,
Black specks on the barrage of gray
That we lift—as they leap—to the clock,
Our infantry storm to the fray.

These are our masters, the slim
Grim muzzles that irk in the pit ;
That chafe for the rushing of wheels,
For the teams plunging madly to bit
As the gunners swing down to unkey,
For the trails sweeping half-circle-right,

For the six breech-blocks clashing as one
To a target viewed clear on the sight—
Dun masses, the shells search and tear
Into fragments that bunch as they run—
For the hour of the red battle-harvest,
The dream of the slaves of the gun.

We have bartered our souls to the guns ;
Every fibre of body and brain
Have we trained to them, chained to them. Serfs ?
Aye ! but proud of the weight of our chain—
Of our backs that are bowed to their workings,
To hide them and guard and disguise—
Of our ears that are deafened with service,
Of hands that are scarred, and of eyes
Grown hawklike with marking their prey—
Of wings that are ripped as with swords
When we hover, the turn of a blade
From the death that is sweet to our lords.

*By the ears and the eyes and the brain,
By the limbs and the hands and the wings,
We are slaves to our masters the guns . . .
But their slaves are the masters of kings !*

Headquarters.

HEADQUARTERS

A LEAGUE and a league from the trenches—from the traversed maze
of the lines,

Where daylong the sniper watches and daylong the bullet whines,
And the cratered earth is in travail with mines and with countermines—

Here, where haply some woman dreamed, (are those her roses that bloom
In the garden beyond the windows of my littered working-room?)
We have decked the map for our masters as a bride is decked for the groom

Fair, on each lettered numbered square—cross-road and mound and wire,
Loophole, redoubt and emplacement—lie the targets their mouths desire ;
Gay with purples and browns and blues, have we traced them their arcs of fire.

And ever the type-keys clatter ; and ever our keen wires bring
Word from the watchers a-crouch below, word from the watchers a-wing :
And ever we hear the distant growl of our hid guns thundering.

Hear it hardly, and turn again to our maps, where the trench-lines crawl,
Red on the gray and each with a sign for the ranging shrapnel's fall—
Snakes that our masters shall scotch at dawn, as is written here on the wall.

For the weeks of our waiting draw to a close. . . . There is scarcely a leaf
astir

In the garden beyond my windows, where the twilight shadows blurr
The blaze of some woman's roses. . . .

“Bombardment orders, sir.”

Gun-Teams.

GUN-TEAMS

THEIR rugs are sodden, their heads are down, their tails are turned to
the storm :

(Would you know them, you that groomed them in the sleek fat days of
peace,

When the tiles rang to their pawings in the lighted stalls, and warm,
Now the foul clay cakes on britching strap and clogs the quick-release?)

The blown rain stings, there is never a star, the tracks are rivers of slime :

(You must harness-up by guesswork with a failing torch for light,

Instep-deep in unmade standings; for it's active-service time,

And our resting weeks are over, and we move the guns to-night.)

The iron tyres slither, the traces sag, their blind hooves stumble and slide ;

They are war-worn, they are weary, soaked with sweat and sopped with rain :

(You must hold them, you must help them, swing your lead and centre wide

Where the greasy granite *bavé* peters out to squelching drain.)

There is shrapnel bursting a mile in front on the road that the guns must
take :

(You are thoughtful, you are nervous, you are shifting in your seat,
As you watch the ragged feathers flicker orange, flame and break) :
But the teams are pulling steady down the battered village street.

You have shod them cold, and their coats are long, and their bellies stiff
with the mud ;

They have done with gloss and polish, but the fighting heart's unbroke . . .
We, who saw them hobbling after us down white roads flecked with blood,
Patient, wondering why we left them, till we lost them in the smoke ;

Who have felt them shiver between our knees, when the shells rain black
from the skies,

When the bursting terrors find us and the lines stampede as one ;
Who have watched the pierced limbs quiver and the pain in stricken eyes ;
Know the worth of humble servants, foolish-faithful to their gun.

Eyes in the Air.

EYES IN THE AIR

OUR guns are a league behind us, our target a mile below,
And there's never a cloud to blind us from the haunts of our lurking foe—
Sunk pit whence his shrapnel tore us, support-trench crest-concealed,
As clear as the charts before us, his ramparts lie revealed.
His panicked watchers spy us, a droning threat in the void;
Their whistling shells outfly us—puff upon puff, deployed
Across the green beneath us, across the flanking gray,
In fume and fire to sheath us and baulk us of our prey.

Below, beyond, above her,
Their iron web is spun :
Flicked but unsnared we hover,
Edged planes against the sun :
Eyes in the air above his lair,
The hawks that guide the gun !

No word from earth may reach us, save, white against the ground,
The strips outspread to teach us whose ears are deaf to sound :
But down the winds that sear us, athwart our engine's shriek,
We send—and know they hear us, the ranging guns we speak.
Our visored eyeballs show us their answering pennant, broke
Eight thousand feet below us, a whorl of flame-stabbed smoke—
The burst that hangs to guide us, while numbed gloved fingers tap
From wireless key beside us the circles of the map.

Line—target—short or over—

Come, plain as clock hands run,
Words from the birds that hover,
Unblinded, tail to sun ;
Words out of air to range them fair,
From hawks that guide the gun !

Your flying shells have failed you, your landward guns are dumb :
Since earth hath naught availed you, these skies be open ! Come,
Where, wild to meet and mate you, flame in their beaks for breath,
Black doves ! the white hawks wait you on the wind-tossed boughs of death.
These boughs be cold without you, our hearts are hot for this,
Our wings shall beat about you, our scorching breath shall kiss ;
Till, fraught with that we gave you, fulfilled of our desire,
You bank—too late to save you from biting beaks of fire—

Turn sideways from your lover,
Shudder and swerve and run,
Tilt ; stagger ; and plunge over
Ablaze against the sun :
Doves dead in air, who clomb to dare
The hawks that guide the gun !

Signals.

SIGNALS

THE hot wax drips from the flares
On the scrawled pink forms that litter
The bench where he sits; the glitter
Of stars is framed by the sandbags atop of the dug-out stairs.
And the lagging watch hands creep;
And his cloaked mates murmur in sleep—
Forms he can wake with a kick—
And he hears, as he plays with the pressel-switch, the strapped receiver click
On his ear that listens, listens;
And the candle-flicker glistens
On the rounded brass of the switch-board where the red wires cluster thick.

Wires from the earth, from the air ;
Wires that whisper and chatter,
At night, when the trench-rats patter
And nibble among the rations and scuttle back to their lair ;
Wires that are never at rest ;
For the linesmen tap them and test,
And ever they tremble with tone ;
And he knows from a hundred signals the buzzing call of his own,
The breaks and the vibrant stresses,—
The F, and the G, and the Esses,
That call his hand to the answering key and his mouth to the microphone.

For always the laid guns fret
On the words that his mouth shall utter,
When rifle and Maxim stutter
And the rockets volley to starward from the spurting parapet ;
And always his ear must hark
To the voices out of the dark ;
For the whisper over the wire,
From the bombed and the battered trenches where the wounded redden
the mire ;
For a sign to waken the thunder
Which shatters the night in sunder
With the flash of the leaping muzzles and the beat of battery-fire.

The Observers.

THE OBSERVERS

ERE the last light that leaps the night has hung and shone and died,
While yet the breast-high fog of dawn is swathed about the plain,
By hedge and track our slaves go back, the waning stars for guide—
Eyes of our mouths, the mists have cleared, the guns would speak again !

Faint on the ear that strains to hear, their orders trickle down :

“Degrees—twelve—left of zero line—corrector one three eight—
Three thousand.” . . . Shift our trails, and lift the muzzles that shall drown
The rifle’s idle chatter when our sendings detonate.

Sending or still, these serve our will ; the hidden eyes that mark,
From gutted farm, from laddered tree that scans the furrowed slope,
From coigns of slag whose pit-props sag on burrowed ways and dark,
In open trench where sandbags mask the steady periscope.

Waking, they know the instant foe, the bullets phutting by,
The blurring lens, the sodden map, the wires that leak or break :
Sleeping, they dream of shells that scream adown a sunless sky . . .
And the splinters patter round them in their dug-outs as they wake.

Not theirs, the wet glad bayonet, the red and racing hour,
The rush that clears the bombing-post with knife and hand-grenade ;
Not theirs the zest when, steel to breast, the last survivors cower :
Yet can ye hold the ground ye won, save these be there to aid ;

These, that observe the shell's far swerve, these of the quiet voice
That bids "go on," repeats the range, corrects for fuze or line? . . .
Though dour the task their masters ask, what room for thought or choice :
This is ours by right of service, heedless gift of youthful eyne.

Careless they give while yet they live : the dead we tasked too sore
Bear witness we were naught begrudged of riches, naught of youth ;
Careless they gave ; across their grave our calling salvoes roar,
And those we maimed come back to us in proof our dead speak truth.

Ammunition Column.

AMMUNITION COLUMN

I AM only a cog in a giant machine, a link of an endless chain :—
*And the rounds are drawn, and the rounds are fired, and the empties
return again ;*
Railroad, lorry, and limber, battery, column, and park ;
*To the shelf where the set tuze waits the breech, from the quay where the shells
embark.*

We have watered and fed, and eaten our beef : the long dull day drags by,
As I sit here watching our "Archibalds" *strafing* an empty sky ;
Puff and flash on the far-off blue round the speck one guesses the plane—
Smoke and spark of the gun-machine that is fed by the endless chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, a little link of the chain,
Waiting a word from the wagon-lines that the guns are hungry again :—
Column-wagon to battery-wagon, and battery-wagon to gun ;
To the loader kneeling 'twixt trail and wheel from the shops where the
steam-lathes run.

There's a lone mule braying against the line where the mud cakes
fetlock-deep ;

There's a lone soul humming a hint of a song in the barn where the drivers
sleep ;

And I hear the pash of the orderly's horse as he canters him down the lane—
Another cog in the gun-machine, a link in the self-same chain.

I am only a cog in a giant machine, but a vital link of the chain ;
And the Captain has sent from the wagon-line to fill his wagons again :—
From wagon-limber to gunpit dump ; from loader's forearm at breech,
To the working party that melts away when the shrapnel bullets screech.
So the restless section pulls out once more in column of route from the right
At the tail of a blood-red afternoon ; so the flux of another night
Bears back the wagons we fill at dawn to the sleeping column again—
Cog on cog in the gun-machine, link on link in the chain !

The Voice of the Guns.

THE VOICE OF THE GUNS

WE are the guns, and your masters ! Saw ye our flashes ?
Heard ye the scream of our shells in the night, and the shuddering
crashes ?

Saw ye our work by the roadside, the shrouded things lying,
Moaning to God that He made them—the maimed and the dying ?
Husbands or sons,
Fathers or lovers, we break them. We are the guns !

We are the guns and ye serve us. Dare ye grow weary,
Steadfast at night-time, at noon-time ; or waking, when dawn winds blow
dreary
Over the fields and the flats and the reeds of the barrier-water,
To wait on the hour of our choosing, the minute decided for slaughter ?
Swift, the clock runs ;
Yea, to the ultimate second. *Stand to your guns !*

We are the guns, and we need you ; here, in the timbered
Pits that are screened by the crest, and the copse where at dusk ye
unlimbered ;
Pits that one found us—and, finding, gave life (Did he flinch from the
giving?) ;
Laboured by moonlight when wraith of the dead brooded yet o'er the living ;
Ere, with the sun's
Rising, the sorrowful spirit abandoned its guns.

Who but the guns shall avenge him? *Battery—Action!*
Load us and lay to the centremost hair of the dial-sight's refraction ;
Set your quick hands to our levers to compass the sped soul's assoiling ;
Brace your taut limbs to the shock when the thrust of the barrel recoiling
Deafens and stuns!
Vengeance is ours for our servants : trust ye the guns !

Least of our bond-slaves or greatest, grudge ye the burden?
Hard, is this service of ours which has only our service for guerdon :
Grow the limbs lax, and unsteady the hands, which aforetime we trusted?
Flawed, the clear crystal of sight ; and the clean steel of hardihood rusted?
Dominant ones,
Are we not tried serfs and proven—true to our guns?

*Ye are the guns! Are we worthy? Shall not these speak for us,
Out of the woods where the tree-trunks are slashed with the vain bolts that
seek for us,*

*Thunder of batteries firing in unison, swish of shell fighting,
Hissing that rushes to silence and breaks to the thud of alighting;*

Death that outruns

Horseman and foot? Are we justified? Answer, O guns!

Yea! by your works are ye justified—toil unrelieved;
Manifold labours, co-ordinate each to the sending achieved;
Discipline, not of the feet but the soul, unremitting, unfeigned;
Tortures unholy by flame and by maiming, known, faced, and disdained;
Courage that shuns
Only foolhardiness; even by these, are ye worthy your guns.

Wherefore,—and unto ye only—power hath been given;
Yea! beyond man, over men, over desolate cities and riven;
Yea! beyond space, over earth and the seas and the sky's high dominions;
Yea! beyond time, over Hell and the fiends and the Death-angel's pinions.

Vigilant ones,

Loose them, and shatter, and spare not. We are the guns!

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